

# Spain: Government tries to ban Basque separatist parties from election

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In the run-up to next month's general election, the ruling Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) is making clear moves to appease right-wing voters. Even the party's closest media supporters in the newspaper *El Pais* note the similarities between campaigns of the PSOE and the right-wing Popular Party (PP).

In the country's northwestern Basque region, this has taken a predictable form, with the government making further attempts to ban two Basque separatist parties from the March 9 elections. Police have also arrested 14 Basque nationalists on suspicion of trying to reorganise the banned separatist party Batasuna following the arrest of its leadership in October of last year.

Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has also ruled out any negotiations with the armed separatist group ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) if the PSOE is re-elected. He told the television station Cuatro that “there isn't any hope of reopening dialogue during the next legislature.” He called for the group to lay down its weapons without conditions.

Zapatero had tried to open talks with ETA following their ceasefire in 2006. He was vilified for this by the PP of former Prime Minister José Maria Aznar, although Aznar himself had done the same thing in 1998. Following the collapse of the ceasefire, the PSOE announced a strengthening of the police and judiciary, which led to the arrests last autumn of 23 leaders of Batasuna (widely seen as ETA's political wing). The PP applauded the arrests.

Batasuna was proscribed in 2003 for its alleged links with ETA. This was the first time since the end of the dictatorship of General Franco that a party had been banned by the Spanish state. It effectively disenfranchised the 15 percent of the local electorate who voted for Batasuna. The PSOE has continued to clamp down on them. Last week Batasuna's remaining senior spokesman Fernando Barrena and Patxi Urrutia, a member of the party's national council, were both arrested after pledging that Batasuna would be present on March 9 “no matter what the circumstances.”

Through electoral deals, Batasuna votes were transferred to two small nationalist parties. The ANV (Acción Nacionalista Vasca—Basque National Action) had been in existence since

1930 as a marginal nationalist party, although it is alleged that Batasuna had revived it as an electoral vehicle. EHAK-PCTV (the Communist Party of the Basque Lands) was formed in 2002. It was completely unknown prior to the 2005 electoral deal that saw it receive Batasuna votes.

Both parties are represented in the regional parliament and have been subject to the state crackdown on Basque separatists. Their headquarters were searched during October's raids, and half of the ANV's candidates were barred from standing in last May's regional and local elections. Both parties are now under threat from the Spanish courts.

Attorney General Candido Conde-Pumpido signaled two weeks ago that proceedings would begin against the parties for their alleged links to ETA. This would suspend the parties' activities, close their offices, and freeze their assets. Both parties would also be prevented from fielding candidates on March 9. Conde-Pumpido argued that EHAK-PCTV had funded Batasuna, and in return, Batasuna had provided operational support to both EHAK-PCTV and the ANV. The police reported that “Batasuna has been instrumental in allowing PCTV and ANV to continue functioning.”

The proceedings were brought by Spain's leading High Court judge, Baltasar Garzon, who also brought the proceedings that led to Batasuna's banning and authorised the raids last October. He called for a five-year ban on EHAK-PCTV and the ANV.

As a step towards the ANV's suspension, Garzon charged party head Kepa Bereziartua and two other party members with membership of a terrorist organisation. Under the 2002 Political Parties Law, at least one member of a party must be charged with a terrorism-related crime before the party can be suspended. The charges against Bereziartua are that the ANV “provided funds” to Batasuna and thus helped “finance the terrorist activities of ETA-Batasuna.”

On February 8, Garzon announced the suspension of both parties for their alleged links with ETA and Batasuna, thereby barring them from participating in the March 9 elections. He was at pains to state that the suspension was not an *ad hoc* measure to prevent the parties standing next month. “Their suspension is being carried out independently of that circumstance,” he claimed but insisted it was “a cautionary

measure.”

Fourteen members of the parties have been charged with terrorism-related crimes, but Garzon claimed that other elected members of the parties would not have to give up their seats. His ruling, he said, “does not affect their activities as individuals and holders of public seats.” This is hardly true if the parties are suspended and prevented from standing at election.

There were tactical disagreements within the ruling class about dealing with the parties. When the matter was referred up to the Supreme Court, Garzon’s bid to suspend the parties was reversed. The Supreme Court is equally committed to the ultimate illegalisation of the parties, but insists that this process must be allowed to unfold over the next few months. Efforts to dissolve the parties immediately, it warned, would be “out of proportion.”

In the statement reversing the decision on the ANV, the Supreme Court stressed that their judgement was completely “compatible” with Garzon’s. Although their offices are allowed to remain open under their ruling and the ANV is allowed to continue organising public events, they are still barred from participating in the election. Nor are they any longer eligible for public subsidies. The Supreme Court emphasised its concern that the party should not win any parliamentary seats, which would guarantee immunity from any future rulings limiting its activities. It later issued a similar statement on EHAK-PCTV.

*El Pais*, praising the decision on the ANV, was clear on the reasoning. Acknowledging that a decision on suspending the parties now “would mean applying before the fact, as a precautionary measure, what would be the final result of a legal process,” the paper stated that barring the party from standing in March was “a preventive measure.” If the Supreme Court had not made this move now but subsequently wanted to ban the party, “there would then be no way to oblige the elected candidates to abandon their seats.” *El Pais* claimed, convincingly, that the Supreme Court must consider it likely the parties will ultimately be proscribed.

For their part, nationalist politicians are seeking to use the attacks to further their separatist and regionalist agenda. Representatives of the self-styled “abertzale [nationalist] left,” including Batasuna, called a “general strike” last week against “judicial, political and police repression.” Tellingly, their demands were only addressed to “Basque citizens,” asking strikers to support a “democratic framework and this country [the Basque region]’s freedom.”

The statement called for a “vote for independence” on March 9, and used the attacks on Basque parties as an opportunity to stress demand for separatism against the moderate nationalists of the Basque National Party (PNV), which dominates the regional government. It accused the PNV of supporting Zapatero’s attacks on regional parties. Referring to a banned demonstration against the suspensions in Bilbao at the

weekend, where several arrests were made, it denounced “the PNV’s political police” for acting in defence of the “Spanish constitutional framework.”

There is nothing progressive about the separatism being advanced by the Basque nationalists. They are seeking greater control over one of Spain’s richer regions with a view to securing international investment. By direct negotiation with international bodies, and by cutting its tax subsidies to Spain’s poorer regions, it aims to carve a niche for the Basque bourgeoisie within the global marketplace. This could only be achieved on the basis of increased exploitation of the regional working class, offering them as a cheap workforce for European and transnational corporations.

Basque separatism serves only to divide Basque workers from their class brothers and sisters in Spain and internationally. This has found its most backward expression in the bombing campaigns of ETA, with its indiscriminate attacks on workers and tourists. ETA had been haemorrhaging support after the September 11, 2001, attacks and the Madrid bombings in 2004. It was forced into a ceasefire through hostility to its regional agenda and the failure of its armed struggle strategy. Through the “peace process,” ETA sought a combined front of Basque nationalist parties in the regional parliament. But they found no support for their participation in government negotiations, as the PSOE moved closer to the PP. ETA therefore announced the end of their ceasefire in June last year, and a resumption of their campaign “on all fronts.”

ETA’s bombs and assassinations have provided an excuse for strengthening the repressive apparatus of the state, and the wielding of that apparatus in attacking democratic rights across the whole country. Police boast of having prevented 10 attacks in recent months. A Basque police official was quoted recently as saying that “If ETA goes on like this, they will soon be handing in their weapons.”



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